

The Republic of Croatia Prepares for European Integrations

Ljerka Mintas Hodak

In the atmosphere of peace which prevailed in the Republic of Croatia last year, discussions about the economic and social situation gradually assumed priority over the fundamental political issues of the creation and defence of the state. The Croatian state emerged under extraordinary circumstances which are now behind us, and the far-reaching issues regarding integration with western democracies are slowly finding their place on the agenda.

Croatia is a European state. Its long affiliation with European cultural and civilisation circles is indisputable, and its ambition to become part of the modern European political, economic and defence structures is less questionable today than it has ever been. The common wish of the general public, the institutions and factors of Croatian society, coupled with the efforts by political structures to bring Croatia closer to Europe, represent a strong link between Croatia and its European neighbourhood and provide a guarantee that Croatian European orientation will be carried through. Since it first gained its independence, Croatia has taken quite a few steps on the road towards integration. However, the overall result of the integration efforts is still unsatisfactory.

Reasons for that should primarily be sought in the fact that for as long as five years we lived in war conditions. The multifaceted transformation processes which are currently under way in Croatian society have also had an adverse impact and slowed down the process of Croatia joining the European family. However, as we are standing at the doorstep of the third millennium, we should cast aside all these objective and subjective reasons and make room for an open and recognisable European orientation within every segment of Croatian society.

It takes more than wishing to be "in Europe". Adaptation to the established European values, standards and requirements should be the priority task at all society levels, more so for the fact that now that peace has been firmly established, a new perspective for joining Western European and trans-Atlantic organisations is being opened.

Ascension into the Council of Europe as a fully fledged member was one of the turning points on this road. It marked the beginning of the future po-

litical, economic and institutional integration of Croatia into the European associations.

New, peace-time conditions oblige us to establish a new strategy and methods of action. Not goals though, since our goal is clear: Croatia's ascension into the European Union. The so called external "europeisation" obviously implies a gradual, and hopefully, the fastest possible integration of Croatia into the European integration processes. The internal "europeisation", on the other hand, should imply the adoption of European standards across the board of Croatia's state and social life. Needless to say, only in unity with other European nations can we join the 21st century global competition.

The current preparations for the united 21st century Europe rely on two fundamental principles: firstly unity, which implies a common policy, market and currency; secondly, a further development and reinforcement of the common identity - involving political, economic, monetary, financial, social and cultural identities. These principles assume their full meaning in the development of three European Union pillars: a) economic and monetary policy; b) common external and security policy; and c) legislation and internal affairs. The Union today faces two challenges which surpass any previous challenge: the Union, such as we have known it, is making a step forward into the previously unknown and non-existent internal cohesion, at the same time preparing itself to admit new members under its wing. We are witnessing a certain kind of a revolution in the development of the European integration processes, both by its scope as well as by its form. Both decisions will have enormous economic, macroeconomic, social and structural consequences.

The historical document of the European Union titled "Agenda 2000", which deals with the fundamental changes facing the process of pan-European integration in the third millennium, states that the expansion represents a historical challenge for the Union. It is also an opportunity for the reinforcement of its security, its economy and its position in the world.

In light of such developments, the European Union is carefully pondering how long-term trends,

both internal and external, will shape future events and impact the attainment of its goals. These contemplations also involve the issue of how to develop a model of the European society for the 21st century, and how to best respond to the major concerns of European citizens. The Union will have to adapt to the ongoing process of globalisation and the emergence of a multilaterally polarised world. Its economic and geopolitical significance enables it to become an important actor on the world scene.

Materialization of European Standards

What are Croatia's position and possible directions of action within this framework? Within the strategy of its external appearance before the Union, the Republic of Croatia should permanently, strongly and forcefully promote Croatian interests and create preconditions for the development of mutually beneficial relations and the strengthening of the overall position of the Croatian state. On the internal field, Croatia must create conditions for further democratic development, the full-scale functioning of the legal state and the building of market economy, and it must try to overcome the consequences of the armed aggression as fast as possible. These are going to be the crucial factors which will determine Croatia's position in 21st century Europe.

The institutional association of Croatia and the Union must be accompanied by the materialisation of European standards in the broadest sense of the term, by the functioning of a democratic state and by a transition towards an open, market economy. At the same time, there should be respect for human rights and sectoral adjustments in various areas. The intensity of integration processes within Western Europe and of the Union's relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe impose upon Croatia the imperative to adjust faster not only at the state level as a whole, but also at all the levels at which its co-operation with the Union is taking place. Practically, it means that European standards must be adopted as the generally accepted and valid social, legal and economic criteria in all spheres of life.

Measures undertaken by Croatia in view of the fastest possible integration with the Union are directly linked with the efforts targeted at economic transition. Preparations for integration should therefore be regarded as an impetus for further economic growth. Likewise, there should be an awareness that the process of economic transition implies high costs for the entire society, but that its long-term benefits are immeasurable. It should be pointed out that a number of economic reforms have already taken place in Croatia so that today, in macroeconomic

terms, we do not lag behind any of the prospective candidates for ascension into full membership of the Union.

The transformation of the economic system into an open economy is very important, but certainly not the only aspect of the problem, since the changes we are witnessing in Europe call for broader and more comprehensive adjustments, relative to the adjustments of the legal system, the organisation of the judiciary and state administration, the adjustment of communication and infrastructure, social policy, cultural and educational policy, the policy of the development of science and technology, environmental protection, etc.

In broader terms, the adjustments are aimed at introducing the necessary legislation and administration changes which would consequently have an impact on all the sectors of economic relations and would create preconditions for co-operation with European integrations, compatible with those existing on the common European market. Adjustments to the integration processes should depart from the prevalent objective circumstances in Croatia and strive to harmonise these circumstances with the generally accepted criteria of behaviour in legal, economic and political terms, as prescribed by the Union and other European institutions and integrations. Therefore, the process of adjustment should be understood as a practical and pragmatic task, which is based on the following fundamental determinants:

- knowledge about the western European system and a continuous monitoring of the changes which take place within the system at all its levels;
- establishing a state-of-affairs in different areas of Croatia with regard to European integration, and the passing and implementation of legislative, economic, administrative, organisational and other measures aimed at bringing compatibility to a higher level;
- the establishment of infrastructure mechanisms which are necessary for integration and co-operation with the European Union;
- the institutional regulation of relations with the Union starting with a co-operation agreement, and subsequently the agreements about associate membership in view of becoming a fully fledged member of the Union.

The Office for European Integrations and the intradepartmental Co-ordination for European Integrations were founded by a government decision on 2 April, 1998. These two bodies are in charge of monitoring the European integration processes, putting forth the proposals regarding measures which should be undertaken in order to bring Croatia closer to European integrations, the implementation of the

principal elements of Croatian strategy regarding the attitude towards integrations - reforms at economic and social levels, the harmonisation of legislation, state administration reforms, education of civil servants, etc. The Office for European Integrations and the intradepartmental Co-ordination for European Integrations, will be the carriers of the task of drawing a road map for Croatia's preparations into European integrations, as a part of the overall national developmental strategy. One of the important tasks consists of educating the general public about the basic notions, activities and organisation of the Union, as well as the introduction of the systematic education of civil servants at all levels.

Internal Adjustment in Different Areas

The process of adjustment to European integrations should be put in a broader perspective and approached by learning about and understanding not only the modern development of the Union and other integrations, but also developmental trends in the countries within the neighbouring regions, which are in a similar position and on similar sections of the road towards their social and political development. Within this perspective, Croatia, as a central European and Mediterranean state, should learn from the experiences of the countries within these two regions, from their relations with European integrations and their internal adjustments in different areas. One should not ignore the fact that Croatia is one of the rare European countries which, owing to its geographic position, has an opportunity to be treated in two different ways. In this respect, the orientation which should be fostered is the one which departs from the specific central European and Mediterranean characteristics of Croatia as complementing each other, and employs these initial advantages to serve the overall development.

The examples of Hungary and Slovenia, which concluded their co-operation agreement with the Union in 1988 and 1993 respectively, and which started their negotiations about their respective ascensions at the same time this year, show that integration dynamics largely depend on the country's capability and speed at which the prospective membership candidate is able to make the necessary adjustments.

The successful implementation of economic and political reforms is the fundamental criterion which governs the Union in determining its policy towards European member states. Therefore, it is certain that in the case of Croatia this will be of crucial importance in the upcoming period. The existing co-operation models, developed by the Union for

the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (and in some of their aspects with the Mediterranean countries as well), may be understood, on certain conditions and assumptions, as a framework within which future relations with Croatia may be developing. Reintegration, or entry into the new Europe is a difficult and time-consuming task. It requires long-term preparations and comprehensive changes within society as a whole. One should not overlook the fact that Croatia is not the only country which has had this tough row to hoe - neighbouring countries have made considerable advances in a short time so their experiences may be valuable and Croatia should learn from them.

Croatia is currently undergoing the phase of intensive preparations for the establishment of an institutionalised form of relations with the Union. Despite the experiences we already have, Croatia is still at the beginning of its road towards integration to the Union in comparison with other central European countries. The conclusion which imposes itself based on the experiences of other eastern and central European states is that it is impossible to speak about a unique institutional or activity model which all the other states or regions should adopt. This is why Croatia is developing its own institutions and its own integration policy in order to find its own way. However, we are closely monitoring the integration models chosen by other countries, in order to be able to draw experiences from their successes and failures and to minimise the cost of Croatia's integration. The timely intensification of activities is a necessary prerequisite for the optimum preparation of the Republic of Croatia for the process of European integrations and accomplishing the strategic goal of joining European integrations as a fully fledged member.